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Sonic journeys with the dead

Exploring sounds, sites and media by listening to a gravesite.

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Sonic journeys with the dead: Exploring sounds, sites and media by listening to a gravesite.

Keywords: Sound studies, Cemeteries, Grave site narratives, Cultural history, Experience design

The research objective of this audio-paper was to conduct a site-specific investigation of relations between a chosen gravesite at Vor Frelser Cemetery (Cemetery of Our Saviour), Copenhagen, Denmark, its cultural history and public co-constructed memories. By focusing on a sonic media production, this audio-paper was a first attempt to establish an alternative approach to meaning-making for cemeteries, using recorded environmental sounds and publicly accessible online digital material to create an awareness of their significance as part of our shared social and cultural history.

Today Vor Frelser Cemetery, established in 1790, still serves as both active traditional ritual space for the interment of the dead (bodies or cremated remains) and as a place for the bereaved to practice their social and private mourning. To the Amager dweller it is moreover a small recreational 'pocket-park' where both visitors and the occasional tourist can enjoy the natural, horticultural and contemplative affordances of the cemetery. As burial ground it represents the typical cultivated metropolitan landscape of silent behaviour, pause, fixity and estrangement (Rugg 2000, Sommer 2003, Worpole 2003).

Research approach

By following a non-representational research approach (Thrift 2004, 2007; Lorimer 2005, 2007, 2008) the author attempted through *sonic imagination* (Sterne, 2012) to *enliven* the cemetery rather than *report* it (Thrift and Dewsbury 2000), to animate the *hybridity of its life-world* (Vannini, 2015) by focusing on its residents (the dead) and their once performed lives and the traces they have drawn across real spaces (sites, locations, neighborhoods) and fictional places (stages, plays, settings in movies) in Copenhagen. Research into Vor Frelser Cemetery revealed eleven graves of buried culturally well-known personalities with a substantial amount of available documentation preserved online (websites, blogs, assessable audio and video recordings). With offset in the particular gravesite of late Danish actor and cultural personage Jesper Klein, the audio-paper production was a aural narrative journey in which chosen spaces, places and temporal events in Jesper Kleins life were animated through relational sound souvenirs, environmental recordings, interviews and user-generated media from Youtube collected by the author. All environmental recordings were made 19th-20th of June 2015, between 12am-5pm.

A sonic journey with the dead

As listeners we are first introduced to an assemblage of sounds recorded from travelling through inner Copenhagen towards Vor Frelser Cemetery in Amager, using public transportation. The juxtaposition of sounds from everyday mobility is contrasted by the aural aesthetics of the cemetery, revealed as we step through the gates and further into the cemetery. As we listen to the silence of the final resting place of Jesper Klein, we suddenly find ourselves outside his now emptied family home at Ole Billed vej, Amager. Each floor inside the abandoned three story house contains sonic portals from which we are sent back and fourth through time, between contemporary spaces (Christiania area of Copenhagen, Vor Frelser Church, The Danish Radio building), old movie clips, mobile phone recordings of political activist encounters and post-mortem interviews with bereaved friends and colleagues of the deceased. The sonic journey ends with the fading voice of Jesper Klein as we exit the cemetery and once again are engulfed by the urban soundscape.

Conclusion

The project attempted to create a meaningful aural experience using the cemetery as starting point, the city as site and media as archive. As an *assemblage* of time, space and media it conveyed a weave of differentiated sites and memories along with a bodily exploration of the

city of Copenhagen. Ideally the audio-paper was meant to be experienced by the listener undertaking the same travel patterns as played out in the audio-production, thereby situating the traces of Jesper Klein at specific sites in real-time. Using Ingold's terms, this would have *animated the relations* (Ingold 2011) between the real and the fictional and followed the non-representational exploration of the hybridity of the urban cemetery and the city, as initially set forth in the research objective. Whether or not this approach succeeded in generating a more meaningful experience, will require more in-depth research and production, but with public and governmental interest in digital preservation strategies rising and the expansion of mobile media technologies for cultural entertainment, the urban cemeteries, being places of fiction and reality (Schechner 2006), show potential for alternative cultural experiences made from listening in on urban spaces and the people that once lived in them.

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Biography:

I am a Phd Fellow (34) at Aalborg University (DK) / Bath University (UK). Thesis title: "Hybrid Cemeteries: Exploring the connections between people, places and social mobile media" (2013-2016). I graduated in 2010 as MSc. In Engineering with specialization in Digital Design from the Department of Architecture, Design and Media Technology, Aalborg University. My previous experience is teaching and research at Architecture, Design and Media Technology/Art & Technology from 2010-2013, with responsibilities of curating, coordination of semesters, supervision of problem based project oriented work, artistic practice, academic methods, urban design, architectural design, representation techniques, media facades and publication.